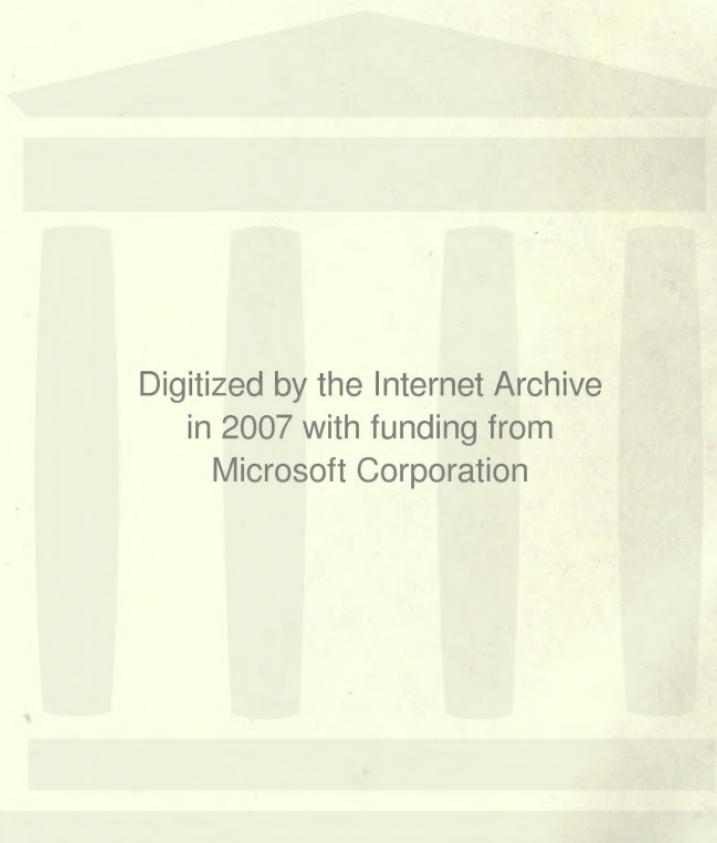


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Making Liberal men and
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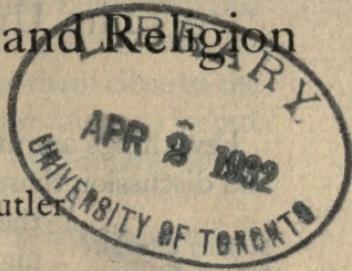
Making Liberal Men and Women Public Criticism of Present-Day Education

The New Paganism

The University, Politics and Religion

by

Nicholas Murray Butler



THE accompanying passages from the Annual Report of the President of Columbia University, submitted to the Trustees of the University on November 7, 1920, deal with subjects of so large and so general a public interest that it has seemed desirable to one who wishes to remain anonymous to cause them to be brought to the attention of public-spirited men and women throughout the country who are themselves not members of Columbia University or directly associated in its work.

New York, February 12, 1921

Making Liberal Men and Women

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Few things are more noticeable in much current writing and discussion than the twisting of well-known terms from their accustomed meanings. This twisting is quite often done consciously and for purposes of propaganda. Perhaps no word in the English language has suffered more from this ill-treatment than the fine word liberal. The historic and familiar significance of this term is that which is worthy of a free man, of one who is open-minded and candid, of one who is open to the reception of new ideas. In this sense the thought which lies behind the word liberal has dominated every really progressive theory of education from the time of Plato to the present day. Just now, however, the word liberal is widely used as though it were synonymous with queer, odd, unconventional, otherwise-minded, in perpetual opposition. There was a time when in the neighborhood of Boston the test of liberalism was the rejection of the Andover Creed, and possibly the rejection of the Apostles' Creed itself. Many would include among liberals those who favor all sorts of social industrial and governmental tyranny, which are by their very nature incompatible with liberty. An enemy of the family and an experimenter with what is called trial marriage, is now called a liberal. The person who would

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destroy government and substitute for the political state of free men a close-working combination of industrial autocracies, is called a liberal. One who sneers at the religious faith or the political convictions of others, and takes care that his attitude is publicly advertised, is called a liberal. Under such circumstances it is plainly necessary to look to one's definitions. The aim of the school, the college and the university has often been described as that of making liberal-minded men and women; but surely this need not be interpreted to include freaks, oddities, revolutionaries and those whose conduct carries them close to the border line which, if crossed, would require them to be put in confinement in the interest of social welfare and social safety.

The truly liberal man or woman will be self-disciplined, and will aim to make knowledge the foundation of wisdom, to base conduct upon fixed character, and to maintain an even temper at difficult times. Considering the conditions of the time in which they lived, the ancient Stoics give us some admirable examples of what is truly meant by a liberal. We cannot afford to let this word be lost or to have stolen before our eyes. Its application should be denied to those individuals and those traits for which it is wrongly claimed, and its true definition and use should be insisted upon everywhere and at all times. Otherwise, we shall have to find some other definition of the aim of education than that of making liberal men and women.

It would be idle to ignore the fact that there is widespread public dissatisfaction with the results of present-day education. Horace Greeley's famous classification of college graduates with horned cattle is too often quoted with approving sarcasm. The mounting cost of education, both tax-supported and other, and its diverse

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competing forms, are increasingly attracting unfavorable public attention and increasingly arousing sharp public criticism. The qualifications of those who teach are not always spoken of with approbation. In the past it has been usual to assume that whatever is done in the name of education, like that which is done in the name of philanthropy or religion, is of necessity well and deservedly done and is to be supported without murmur. There are, however, too many signs that education does not satisfactorily educate to justify or even to ensure a longer continuance of this uncritical acquiescence. What is the trouble?

Perhaps a hint of where to look for an answer may be found in the remark of an undergraduate who had been in attendance upon a lecture by one of the foremost living authorities in his field. "A very scholarly lecture," the undergraduate was heard to say as the audience passed out, but his tone was one of distinct protest that he had spent his time in listening to scholarship. Scholarship, it must be confessed, is not popular in America, and what is blithely referred to as the revolt against intellectualism is, in last analysis, nothing more or less than the revolt against the influence of those who know. It is the passionate cry of ignorance for power. A casual impression gained from the reading of some hopelessly befogged magazine or from some haphazard newspaper headline, or a response to some emotional "urge"—the newest name for appetite—is greatly preferred to real knowledge. The ruling passion just now is not to know and to understand, but to get ahead, to overturn something, to apply in ways that bring material advantage some bit of information or some acquired skill. Both school and college have in large part taken their minds off the true business of education, which is to prepare youth to live, and have fixed them upon something which is very subordinate, namely, how to prepare youth to make a living. This is all part and parcel of the prevailing tendency to measure

everything in terms of self-interest. Economic explanations of the conduct of individuals, of groups and of nations—that is, explanations based upon desire for gain or love of power—are sought rather than explanations based upon intellectual or ethical foundations. But a civilization based upon self-interest rather than upon intellectual and moral principle would swiftly lapse into the barbarism out of which it has come. An educational system based upon self-interest is not worthy the support and the sacrifice of a civilized people.

We are doubtless passing through a period of reaction in education which will spend itself as periods of reaction have so often spent themselves before. The sure mark of a real reactionary is his contempt for all that man has learned and done, and his demand that the history of human achievement be thrown away and the task begun all over again on the basis of present-day dissatisfaction and distress. The sure mark of the true progressive is his acceptance of human experience, his desire to understand and to interpret it, and his determination that it shall be made the foundation for something better, something happier and something more just than anything which has gone before.

The underlying condition essential to human happiness is progress in the power to produce. Unless that power to produce is the outgrowth of understanding, of mastery of principles, of knowledge of past achievement and of insight into high and lasting purpose, it will not accomplish anything desirable or permanent. For a quarter century past American educational practice has been steadily losing its hold upon guiding principle and has, therefore, increasingly come to float and drift about upon the tide of mere opinion, without standards, without purpose and without insight. The little red school house of the generation that followed the Civil War, with its wretchedly poor equipment but with an earnest and

devoted teacher who laid stress upon character-building and upon the fundamentals of intellectual training, did more for the American people than does many a costly and well-equipped educational palace such as may be seen in any part of the United States today. It is as discouraging as it is startling to find Henry James, so lately as 1913, describing the college town which he knew best as "utterly arid and vacuous."

This decline in educational power is primarily the result of a widely influential and wholly false philosophy of education which has operated to destroy the excellence of the American school and college, as these existed a generation ago, without putting anything in its place. It has been dinned into our ears that all subjects are of equal educational value, and that it matters not what one studies, but only how he studies it. This doctrine has destroyed the standard of value in education, and in practical application is making us a widely instructed but an uncultivated and undisciplined people. We are now solemnly adjured that children, however young, must not be guided or disciplined by their elders, but that they must be permitted to give full and free expression to their own individuality, which can of course only mean their own utter emptiness. In education as in physics, nature abhors a vacuum. Were such a theory as that to become dominant for any length of time, the whole world would thereby be sentenced to remain forever in the incompetence and immaturity of childhood. No generation would be helped or permitted to stand on the shoulders of its predecessors, or to add something to what they had already gained. Life would then be merely an everlasting beginning, devoid of accomplishment and without other aim than the multiplication of nervous reactions to a variety of accidental and rapidly succeeding stimuli. The much despised *τὸ τέλος* is essential to any movement that is progress; anything else is mere intellectual, social and political wriggling.

With the decline of genuine educational guidance and helpful discipline there has gone an increasingly vigorous warfare on excellence and distinction of every kind, which is truly pathetic in its destructiveness. Youth are told that they must exert themselves and excel, but if they chance to take this advice and succeed they are then pointed to as the evil products of a harmful and ill-organized social system. So long ago as October 31, 1888, Professor Goldwin Smith, an inveterate liberal and a keen observer of his kind, wrote to Mrs. Humphrey Ward: "Over the intellectual dead-level of this democracy opinion courses like the tide running in over a flat." Under such conditions the mob spirit becomes increasingly powerful. The demagogue, the persistent and plausible self-seeker, and those who possess or can command the large sums of money needed to advertise themselves throughout the land, occupy the largest place in the public eye and actually come to think of themselves and be thought of as representative Americans. It is not surprising that at least three-fourths of the best ability and best character in the United States remains in hiding, so far as public knowledge and public service are concerned.

It is significant, too, that in this period of vigorous and able-bodied reaction the world should be without a poet, without a philosopher, and without a notable religious leader. The great voices of the spirit are all stilled just now, while the mad passion for gain and for power endeavors to gratify itself through the odd device of destroying what has already been gained or accomplished.

To get back upon the path of constructive progress will be a long and difficult task. A first step will be to bring back the elementary school to its own proper business. The elementary school being universal, well-organized and easily accessible, has been seized upon by faddists and enthusiasts of every type as an instrumentality not for

better education, but for accomplishing their own particular ends. The simple business of training young children in good habits of diet and exercise and conduct; of teaching them the elementary facts of the nature which surrounds them and of the society of which they form a part; and of giving them ability to read understandingly, to write legibly and to perform quickly and with accuracy the fundamental operations with numbers, has been pushed into the background by all sorts of enterprises that have their origin in emotionalism, in ignorance, or in mere vanity. Through lack of knowledge of educational values, and their fear of an uninformed public opinion, the secondary schools and the colleges have very largely abdicated their place as leaders in modern life and have become the plaything of whatever temporary and passing influences may operate upon them. In the hope of becoming popular they have thrown overboard principle. Throughout elementary school, high school and college, teachers are too often not teachers at all, but preachers or propagandists for some doctrine of their own liking. One would think that the business of teaching was sufficiently simple and sufficiently important to be kept unconfused with other forms of influence; but such has not been the case. Very many teachers are preachers or propagandists first and teachers afterwards.

It is in conditions like these that one must look for an explanation of the costly ineffectiveness which is so sharply charged against present-day education in the United States. We are told that boys and girls, young men and young women, spend years apparently in study and then leave school or college without a trained intelligence, without any standards of appreciation in art or in morals, with wretched manners, with slovenly speech, and without capacity to approach a new problem dispassionately or to reason about it clearly. It is asserted that we devote untold skill and labor to the teaching of

French, of Spanish and of German, and yet the high school or college graduate who can speak or write any one of these languages correctly and freely, or read them save with difficulty, is rare indeed; that for fifty years we have poured out money without stint for the teaching of the natural and experimental sciences, and have provided costly laboratories and collections to make that teaching practical, yet the result, so far as giving a general command of scientific method or general knowledge of scientific facts is concerned, is quite negligible; that school and college students spend years upon the study of history and yet few really know any history; that these students are uniformly taught to read and are guided toward reading that which is worth while, yet it is clear that the greater part of their reading is of that which is unworthy to be read. More criticism than was ever leveled against the study of Latin, Greek and mathematics based upon the meager practical results obtained, can be repeated with equal force against those newer subjects of school and college study which have so largely displaced Latin, Greek and mathematics.

In Columbia College a definite and well-considered attempt is making to overcome these unfortunate conditions of modern education, and to build a wise, judicious and truly educational program of study upon a sound foundation. This foundation is provided by the course entitled *Introduction to Contemporary Civilization*, prescribed for all members of the Freshman Class, and given five times weekly throughout Freshman Year. The purpose of this course is to give the student early in his college residence a body of objective material upon which to base his own later and more advanced studies and his own judgments concerning the world in which he lives. A result of prescribing this course for all Freshmen is to make sure that every student in Columbia College has a common starting point and a single point of vantage from which to

study, to understand and to appreciate the world of nature and of man. It is significant, too, that in this course the student is brought at once face to face with real interests and with genuine problems as they exist today. These interests and these problems are then placed in their historic setting, the story of their development is traced, and they are analyzed into their simplest parts. The large measure of success that has attended the introduction of this course, and the great interest taken in it by the undergraduates themselves, indicate that the Faculty of Columbia College is on the right track, and that it seems likely to do its full part in rescuing American college education from the reproach that is so often heaped upon it, sometimes perhaps unjustly, but too frequently with a measure of justice that we cannot refuse to recognize.

The College Faculty has gone farther and in establishing a special course of reading, to be followed through two years by candidates for general honors, has recorded its conviction that the college graduate may properly be held to some knowledge of the masterpieces in literature, in poetry, in history, in philosophy and in science. The reading list at present given to candidates for the degree of Bachelor of Arts with general honors, includes: Homer, Herodotus, Thucydides, Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, Aristophanes, Plato, Aristotle, Lucretius, Horace, Plutarch, Marcus Aurelius, St. Augustine, The Nibelungenlied, The Song of Roland, St. Thomas Aquinas, Dante, Petrarch, Montaigne, Shakespeare, Cervantes, Francis Bacon, Milton, Molière, David Hume, Montesquieu, Voltaire, Rousseau, Adam Smith, Lessing, Kant, Schiller, Goethe, Macaulay, Victor Hugo, Hegel, Darwin, Lyell, Tolstoi, Nietzsche.

This provides a rich feast of reason, and if it is wanting in any respect it is in not sufficiently representing the fine arts, other than poetry, which have in every age been the finest flower of a people's aspiration.

Every conceivable explanation of unrest, dissatisfaction and disorder that prevails throughout the world has been proposed except the one which is probably the deepest and most important. For between two hundred and three hundred years the modern world has been in a state of intellectual upheaval, although there are those who think that this condition began with the world war or was caused by it. This upheaval has grown constantly more widespread and more severe. The forces that lie behind it have profoundly affected the religious life and the religious faith of great masses of men, have shaken their confidence in age-old principles of private morals and of public policy, and have left them blindly groping for guiding principles to take the place of those that have lost their hold. A generation ago John Fiske, in one of his luminous essays, pointed out that a necessary effect of the Copernican theory of the universe was to make the earth and its inhabitants seem so small and insignificant as to be quite unimportant in the scheme of things and to transfer the center of gravity of man's interest to suns and worlds far more vast and far more important than ours. While the Copernican theory may logically seem to have required this result, what has happened is quite different. Man's attention and interest have been increasingly turned to himself, his immediate surroundings, and his instant occupation. Having come to feel himself quite superior to all that has gone before, and being without faith in anything that lies beyond, he has tended to become an extreme egotist. The natural result has been to measure the universe in terms of himself and his present satisfactions. His own emotions and his own appetites, being present and immediate, take precedence in the shaping of conduct and of policy over any body of principles built up by the experience of others. The wisdom, the justice, the morality of an act or policy are then tested solely by its immediate results, and these

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results are increasingly measured in terms of the material and emotional satisfactions of the moment.

In a world so constituted and so motived unrest, dissatisfaction and disorder are a necessity. Set free a million or a thousand million wills to work each for the accomplishment of its own immediate material satisfactions, and nothing but unrest, dissatisfaction and disorder is possible.

What appears to have happened is that in setting free the individual human being from those external restraints and compulsions which constitute tyranny, he has also been set free from those internal restraints and compulsions which distinguish liberty from license. The pendulum has swung too far. The time has come, the time is indeed already past, when the pendulum should begin its swing backward toward the middle point of wisdom, of sanity, of self-control and of steady progress.

There is no man, there is no people, without a God. That God may be a visible idol, carved of wood or stone, to which sacrifice is offered in the forest, in the temple, or in the market-place; or it may be an invisible idol, fashioned in a man's own image and worshipped ardently at his own personal shrine. Somewhere in the universe there is that in which each individual has firm faith, and on which he places steady reliance. The fool who says in his heart "There is no God" really means there is no God but himself. His supreme egotism, his colossal vanity, have placed him at the center of the universe which is thereafter to be measured and dealt with in terms of his personal satisfactions. So it has come to pass that after nearly two thousand years much of the world resembles the Athens of St. Paul's time, in that it is wholly given to idolatry; but in the modern case there are as many idols as idol worshippers, and every such idol worshipper finds his idol in the looking-glass. The time has come once again to repeat and

to expound in thunderous tones the noble sermon of St. Paul on Mars Hill, and to declare to these modern idolaters "Whom, therefore, ye ignorantly worship, Him declare I unto you."

There can be no cure for the world's ills and no abatement of the world's discontents until faith and the rule of everlasting principle are again restored and made supreme in the life of men and of nations. These millions of man-made gods, these myriads of personal idols, must be broken up and destroyed, and the heart and mind of man brought back to a comprehension of the real meaning of faith and its place in life. This cannot be done by exhortation or by preaching alone. It must be done also by teaching; careful, systematic, rational teaching, that will show in a simple language which the uninstructed can understand what are the essentials of a permanent and lofty morality, of a stable and just social order, and of a secure and sublime religious faith.

Here we come upon the whole great problem of national education, its successes and its disappointments, its achievements and its problems yet unsolved. Education is not merely instruction—far from it. It is the leading of the youth out into a comprehension of his environment, that, comprehending, he may so act and so conduct himself as to leave the world better and happier for his having lived in it. This environment is not by any means a material thing alone. It is material of course, but, in addition, it is intellectual, it is spiritual. The youth who is led to an understanding of nature and of economics and left blind and deaf to the appeals of literature, of art, of morals and of religion, has been shown but a part of that great environment which is his inheritance as a human being. The school and the college do much, but the school and the college cannot do all. Since Protestantism broke up the solidarity of the ecclesiastical organization in the western world, and since democracy made intermingling

of state and church impossible, it has been necessary, if religion is to be saved for men, that the family and the church do their vital cooperative part in a national organization of educational effort. The school, the family and the church are three cooperating educational agencies, each of which has its weight of responsibility to bear. If the family be weakened in respect of its moral and spiritual basis, or if the church be neglectful of its obligation to offer systematic, continuous and convincing religious instruction to the young who are within its sphere of influence, there can be no hope for a Christian education or for the powerful perpetuation of the Christian faith in the minds and lives of the next generation and those immediately to follow. We are trustees of a great inheritance. If we abuse or neglect that trust we are responsible before Almighty God for the infinite damage that will be done in the life of individuals and of nations.

The contacts and associations of civilized men are many and various. The two contacts and associations that have been most lasting and most influential are those which constitute the State and the Church. The State is the expression of man's ability to cooperate with his fellows in establishing law, in preserving order, and, as the generations pass, in protecting the opportunity of each individual to achieve and to enjoy liberty. The Church is the expression of man's desire to cooperate in worship of the object of his faith. Both State and Church have a long and familiar history, and there is no need to recount any part of it here. Of the other contacts and associations of men, none is likely to be considered more important than that which has for its purpose the conservation, the advancement, and the dissemination of knowledge, together with the pursuit of truth, upon which activity all knowledge depends for its vital power. When men are sufficiently

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convinced that the pursuit of truth is an object worthy of their lifelong endeavor, the university as we now know it comes into existence as both the voice and the symbol of this form of human activity. When men associate together in pursuit of truth, their ruling thought is not agreement, but truth as each finds and interprets it. For this reason there will be in the university nothing which approaches agreement or unity as to matters of politics or religion beyond the fact that honest and sincere men are protected in their right to hold such political and religious view as they may choose, provided only that these are consistent with the pursuit of truth itself and with the welfare and usefulness of the particular society of scholars to which they belong. With all the good will in the world toward an individual who might dissent from the multiplication table or insist that he had solved the problem of perpetual motion, the teachers of mathematics and of physics would not be able to find a place for him in their teaching ranks. Somewhere in the fields of religion and politics a similar line is to be drawn, but it is difficult to find, and still more difficult to apply if found.

There is no recognized doctrine of human liberty which extends to the individual the unchallenged right to take his own life. If he attempts it he is forcibly prevented, and if he attempts it and fails, he is punished. What is true of an individual is true likewise of men's associations in the State and in the Church. There comes a time when dissent takes on the form of suicide or assault with intent to kill, and when, therefore, it is prevented and punished. The philosophical basis for this is clear enough. There can be no serious discussion of truth and no sincere attempt to answer the question of jesting Pilate, unless it be assumed that there is such a thing as truth to be pursued, and if possible, found. When found and demonstrated, truth is to be recognized and acted upon. It will not do for someone else to say that he has a wholly contrary conception of

truth, or that truth for him means something quite other than truth for anyone else. Some forms of this genially inconsequent doctrine are just now enjoying a certain short-lived popularity based upon a false psychology and a grievous travesty on philosophy, but their irrationality and the immorality of conduct based upon them are so obvious that their life is certain to be short.

Underlying the organization of the university, then, there is a certain general, very general, agreement on a series of fundamental assumptions as to the State and the Church; Columbia University, for instance, is both American and Christian. Unless a university entirely abandons its own peculiar aim and becomes merely an instrument of propaganda for some specific doctrine, it cannot in its institutional capacity properly go beyond this and be drawn into either political or religious controversy. Its individual members, be they few or many, will follow the guidance of their several heads and hearts in seeking or accepting political and religious associations and in advancing specific political or religious doctrines; but they will not, indeed they cannot, thereby commit the university to their own convictions or beliefs.

It must be borne in mind, then, that any member of a university who does his duty as he sees it in citizenship and in the religious life is doing it solely as an individual, and that his university relationship or activity is in no wise affected thereby. This is a hard lesson for some observers of contemporary life to learn. They do not seem able to understand how it is that one individual may have a variety of human associations and yet not commit them all to his own course in relation to any one of them. Clear thinking will distinguish between men's different associations, and it will be able to render unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's, and to render unto God the things which are God's.

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